

March 29, 1971

Mrs. Sally G. Shelowitz  
597 Dover Road  
Oceanside, L.I., New York 11572

Dear Mrs. Shelowitz,

Thank you for your letter of March 18th concerning the conquest of cancer. You are indeed correct in identifying my deep interest in this subject. Without the articulate expression of the interest of citizens like yourself nothing useful is likely to be accomplished by way of the necessary legislative and executive initiatives.

It was unfortunate that the issue of establishing a firm commitment to the solution of cancer problems has become confused with a particular proposal for the organization of the effort. I refer especially to the National Cancer Authority. At one time I believed that we would have to press for this kind of reorganization in order to get any meaningful action within HEW and the executive branch. However, now that the White House has made a vigorous response, and has promised to provide whatever level of funding can be meaningfully used, I no longer advocate this particular form of administration. The establishment of the National Cancer Authority as a separate agency introduces grave risks that the cancer program will become a political football, or at best that it may succeed in the style of the space program of the last decade - namely a magnificent technical solution to the wrong set of problems. Furthermore, the division of NIH would not only weaken and confuse other areas of health research but would also be a very serious detriment to work in cancer itself. The phrase in your letter "a sole authority set up to investigate cancer alone" is an attractive slogan, but it is absolutely unrelated to the scientific realities of the problem.

As you may note from my enclosed writings I am indeed particularly attached to a high priority for the study of environmental factors in cancer with a view to efficacious prevention. But it is precisely in this field that "the study of cancer alone" is a scientific and tactical impossibility. In order to evaluate the possible function of environmental additives we must view their reactions with important constituents of the cell and with, for example, DNA from a much broader perspective than "cancer alone". If we do not do this we will not know the appropriate questions to ask. Had a cancer authority been established 15 years ago along the lines of some of its present advocates we would have failed to learn many of the essentials of molecular biology, of virus action, and of immunology that only today are recognized as being crucial to the cancer problem.

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You could on the other hand argue that a National Cancer Authority would have sufficient scope to embrace all of these fundamental disciplines. But if it did it would, in fact, be a national health research authority and this is not likely to be achieved by the dissection of the existing apparatus of the NIH. It is a movement that I would advocate - it requires more careful planning (than has been done to date but I would certainly press for strong initiatives to get such planning under way.

Permit me to thank you again for the dedication of your own energies to this common task. I enclosed some additional material that may be of interest to you.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

2 Enclosures (226, 226A)  
JL/rr